

Gulf Islands National Park Reserve: A Conservation Assessment Review

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Background

The Gulf Islands National Park Reserve (GINPR) was established in May 2003 – the culmination of efforts by the Governments of Canada and British Columbia under the Pacific Marine Heritage Legacy Program. The GINPR is within the Strait of Georgia Lowlands Natural Region which is one of the most disturbed landscapes in Canada due to historic and current land use and population growth. The key objectives for the GINPR are to ensure, for the long term, the integrity of the ecological and cultural values within the park; and to provide opportunities for the public to learn about and appreciate the values within the park in a low-impact manner.

The park reserve is made up of 3500 ha of land on 15 islands and over 50 islets, and 2600 ha of intertidal and nearshore subtidal marine areas distributed throughout the southern Gulf Islands region of British Columbia, Canada (Figure 1). Along with the many islets, 5 complete islands are protected (Tumbo, Georgeson, Russell Portland and D'Arcy) and there is substantial representation on several larger islands including Saturna (43%), South Pender (30%), Prevost (19%), Sidney (15%), North Pender (10%) and Mayne (1%). In addition, future land acquisitions will be considered on a willing seller/willing buyer basis.

Parks Canada is developing Interim Management Guidelines to direct management and operational decisions prior to the approval of a Park Management Plan. Issues under consideration in the Guidelines include Ecological Integrity, Commemorative Integrity (Cultural Resources), levels and types of human use, zoning of park lands, and development of partnerships. The draft Interim Management Guidelines will be available for public comment in April 2005. Public Consultations (open houses) are scheduled between April and June 2005.

As part of the establishment process, a Park Advisory Board has been established. This board provides guidance to park managers and represents the Capital Regional District (regional government), the Islands Trust (regional land use planning) as well as 3 public members. Parks Canada has also negotiated interim management agreements with 7 of the 19 First Nations who have indicated an interest in the Southern Gulf Islands. Efforts continue to build on these successes.

In order to ensure that ecological integrity (EI) is given appropriate consideration in planning initiatives, a conservation assessment and review was undertaken to identify and prioritize conservation issues for the Southern Gulf Islands and the GINPR and to begin the development of strategies for their mitigation.

Challenges and Opportunities

There are many conservation challenges that face the managers of GINPR. Atypical of national parks in Canada, the GINPR is comprised of lands extracted from a highly settled region. As a result, the land parcels are highly fragmented with approximately 150 km of boundary adjacent to small private land holdings and a variety of land uses including agriculture, grazing, forestry, vineyards and residential development. The Gulf Islands have a long history of settlement and land use which has, in some instances, resulted in a highly modified landscape. Over 85% of the park lands are considered young Douglas fir forest indicating that logging has occurred on these lands some time in the past 60-100 years. Other lands have been ditched and drained for pasture land, orchards and more industrial activity such as mining. There is little, if any, "old growth" benchmarks represented and many of the landscape scale ecosystem processes and functions have been effectively eliminated in recent memory.

The park is located in a high use and high population area with a regional population of approximately 6 million. This creates a high demand for well established access and use but also provides significant public expectation and support to meet our mandate and manage human uses appropriately. Our lands are situated in a matrix of rural communities that are sensitive to the potential benefits and impacts that the park may have on their lifestyles. Parks Canada aspires to be a good neighbor by building relationships with the communities, businesses, organizations and individuals to deliver our program and meet common objectives.

As you scope down from regional to more site specific interests, there is a general paucity of systematic surveys or baseline ecological data for sensitive ecosystems, critical habitats or species at risk. The small islets are recognized

as relatively intact and, as such, provide refuge for many native species and critical habitat for marine wildlife. There are high conservation values on National Park lands but adjacent lands are also important for conservation and linkages need to be better understood. Exotic species are a regional if not global challenge that is exacerbated on these small island ecosystems. In addition, many native species and important ecological processes have been excluded from the region in recent memory and it will be important to better understand the ecological roles of elements such as wildfire and predators in both an historic sense and in the current context of public interest and liability. As already mentioned, human settlement plays a large role in this ecosystem and it will be essential to better understand the past, current and potential future levels of human use with respect to tourism, First Nations traditional activities, resource harvesting as well as general trends in demographics and settlement patterns. Most importantly for Parks Canada, the new kid on the block, it is imperative that we communicate locally and regionally, our mandate, the scope of activities appropriate to a national park, the delineation of our boundaries, and, of course, the incredible heritage that we are responsible for in the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve.

Conservation Initiatives Underway

There are several key initiatives underway, each of which could generate a lengthy discussion. However, in order to provide a flavor of our conservation program to date, the following overview provides some key program elements with respect to baseline research and inventory, control of non-native species and ecological restoration. Several of these initiatives were started in anticipation of park establishment and in many cases, they are ongoing programs. The dates shown below indicate timelines from establishment to the present.

Baseline research and inventory

- **Conservation Assessment and Review** (as described above) (2004)
- **Species at Risk Assessment Report** describing all known occurrences of Species at Risk in the core area (2004)
- **Flora inventory and monitoring** (native and introduced)
 - completed for 10 islets and selected sites of interest (2003-2005)
 - compilation of records in standard database (2005)
- **Fauna inventory and monitoring** (native and introduced)
 - Introduced vertebrates (2003)
 - sharp-tailed snake (2003-2005)
 - herpetiles (2004)
 - terrestrial invertebrates (2004-2005)
- **Disturbance** (fire history and palaeoclimatology) (2003-2005)
- **Ecosystem classification and mapping**
 - intertidal ShoreZone update (2004)
 - enhanced TEM (terrestrial) mapping (2005)
 - nearshore subtidal habitat mapping (2004-2005)
- **Archaeology and historic settlement history** (2003-2005)

Control of non-native species

- **Integrated Pest Management Plan for invasive alien species** (2005)
- **Flora**
 - Plant removal on approximately 10 small islets (2003-2005)
 - Working with partners for plant removals (Mayne and Portland Islands) (2003-2005)
 - Invasive species control on D'Arcy Island (2004-2005)
- **Fauna (vertebrates)**
 - Impact assessment and preliminary planning for management of feral goats (Saturna Island) (2005)
 - Impact assessment and preliminary planning for management of fallow deer (Sidney Island) (2003-2005)

Ecological restoration of disturbed lands

- Warburton Pike summit – removal of radio tower and vehicular access (Saturna Island) (2003)
- Roesland Seawall – remediation of failed seawall (Pender Island) (2005)

- Lyall Creek habitat restoration – restoration of in-stream and riparian habitat (Saturna Island) (2003-2005)

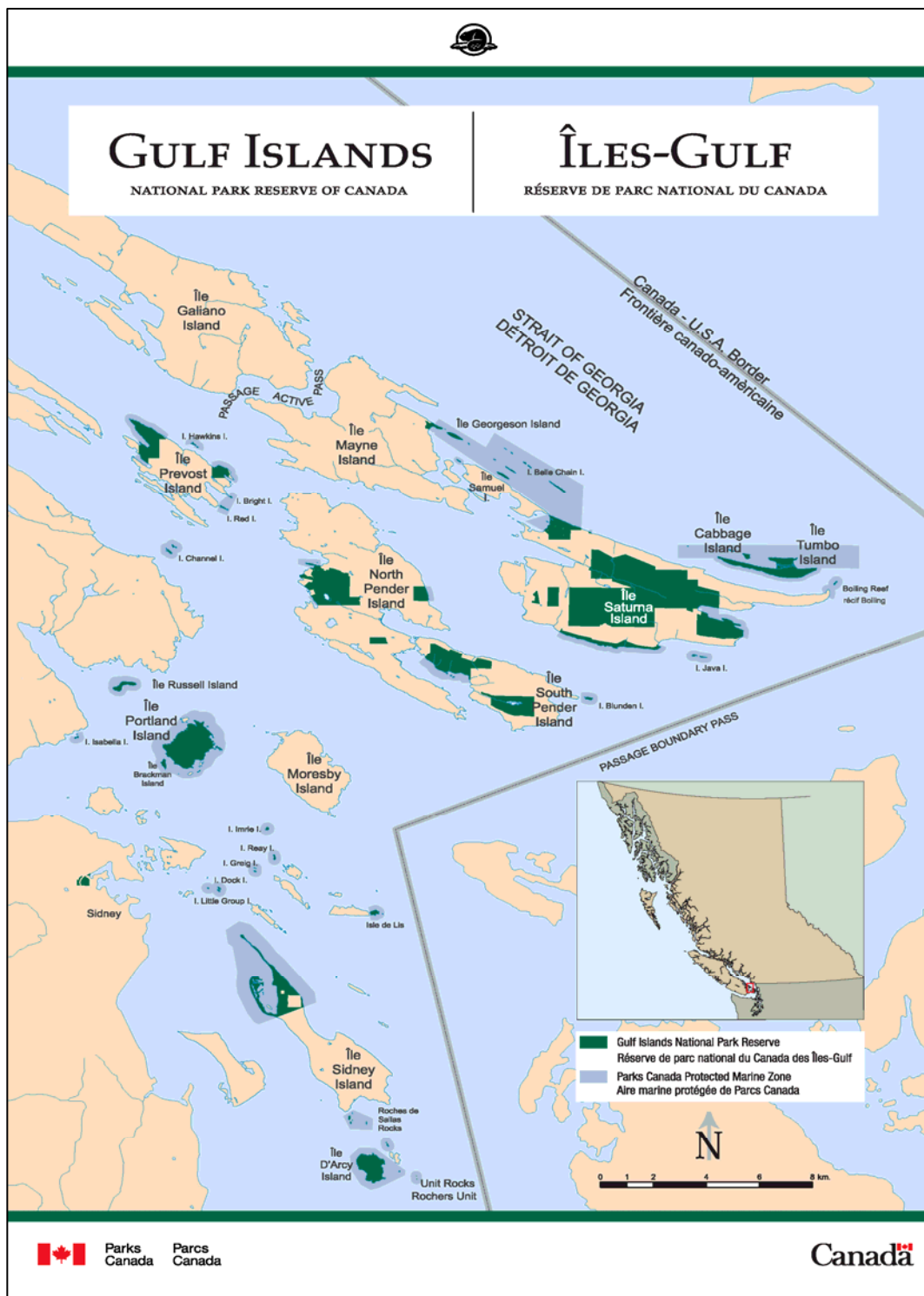


Figure 1. Gulf Islands National Park Reserve: Lands protected in the Southern Gulf Islands, British Columbia, Canada.